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Defectors: immigrants or cold war pawns?

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Does America's welcome mat need to be dusted off?

The nation that coined "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" is asking whether it has treated recent defectors as pawns in a superpower chess match instead of fleet-footed immigrants.

The commissioner of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, Alan C. Nelson, has announced an investigation of the incident in which Ukrainian seaman Miroslav Medvid was forcibly returned to his ship Oct. 25. Mr. Nelson says evidence suggests that agency procedures were not followed in the case and that the investigation could lead to disciplinary action against the immigration agents involved.

Defectors should be treated as individual human beings seeking shelter from oppression, says Vladislav Krasnov of the Monterey Institute of International Studies, who himself defected to Sweden in 1962.

Professor Krasnov says that a strictly humanitarian approach would minimize the temptation to assess defections by their possible impact on US-Soviet relations. He feels the Ukrainian sailor's chances of successfully defecting were reduced because of concern within the State Department that the event might affect the coming Reagan-Gorbachev summit.

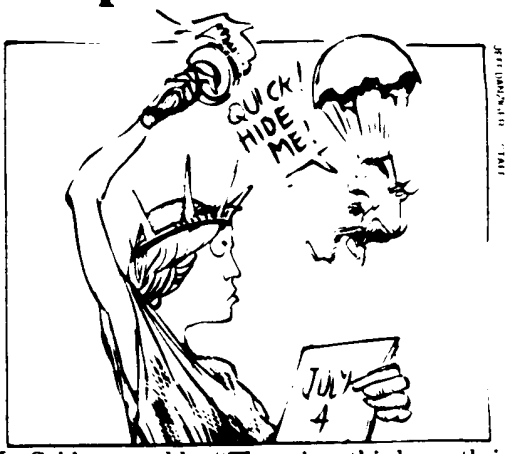
"The main thing is to stick to the principles . . . and longstanding tradition of the United States offering hospitality to oppressed people," says Krasnov, author of "Soviet Defectors: The KGB Wanted List" to be published by the Hoover Institution next month.

A second inquiry into the treatment accorded defectors comes amid speculation that the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) may have contributed to Vitaly Yurchenko's apparent decision to return to Moscow last week by being insensitive to his state of mind while trying to squeeze as much information as possible out of him.

Mr. Yurchenko, a senior KGB official who defected to the United States Aug. 1, walked away from his CIA escort on Nov. 2, and two days later held a press conference at the Soviet Embassy. He charged he had been drugged and kidnapped by the CIA. US officials vigorously deny the charges. They speculate that Yurchenko was either part of an elaborate "sting" operation planned by the KGB or was an actual defector who simply couldn't cope with his decision to leave the Soviet Union, his wife, and 16-year-old son behind.

Critics maintain that Yurchenko's CIA handlers should have been more friendly to him and allowed him to mix with other Soviet émigrés in an effort to make him feel more at home in his new surroundings. Intelligence experts say that most Soviet defectors have gone through extended periods of sadness and confusion after their decisions to leave family and country behind.

"It was like a cold shower," says Vladimir Sakharov, describing the 10-month CIA debriefing after his defection from a KGB post in Kuwait in 1971. "I had a very hostile polygraph interrogation initially. They tried to bring me down to the lowest possible level," he says.



Mr. Sakharov adds, "There is a third month in a defection that is remorse. It happened in my case. Of course, I couldn't share my feelings with my debriefers, because I was scared of them. And I couldn't share my feelings with the security men, because I was even more scared of them than of my debriefers. I really don't know how I survived the first year in the United States; it is sort of a miracle to me."

Officials say the danger in the Yurchenko and Medvid affairs is that they could have a chilling effect on future defectors. The US has long regarded defectors as a primary source of both intelligence and cultural information — an open window into the closed Soviet system.

"Defectors have been one of the best sources of information we have on the hostile intelligence threat to the west," says Roy Godson, an intelligence specialist and professor at Georgetown University.

He warns that the debate surrounding Yurchenko's treatment in the US may unwittingly be playing into the hands of the Soviets. " 'The CIA does not treat defectors very well.' That is a message designed to reach Soviet officials who live abroad — 'Don't get near the CIA, they will make life unpleasant for you,' " Mr. Godson says.

Sakharov says what is needed is a series of well-publicized reforms. Among them: immediate job placement during the debriefing process in a career that offers defectors a vision of a productive future in the US.

"When you have no vision you have no hope. I was hopeless for four years," says Sakharov, who said the CIA never kept its promise to find him a good job. "For a Russian to be unemployed is a crime — I was brought up that way."

Both Krasnov and Sakharov praise the work already being done at the private-sector Jamestown Foundation in Washington. The foundation was formed in an effort to help Soviet-bloc defectors cope with the shock and difficulties of Western life. Through an established support network of former defectors, émigrés, and concerned Americans, the foundation helps new defectors find jobs and housing, enroll in English lessons, and make friends among Americans. Krasnov calls the Jamestown Foundation "an idea whose time has come."

"Defectors are extremely valuable individuals from the intelligence point of view. And they are human beings," says Godson. "I would hope that they would be treated [by the US government] as valuable individuals."